

That plastic yellow rose lying next to West Lindo Avenue would have flowed into Lindo Channel with the next rain storm if I hadn't found it. It would have been smashed into big and tiny yellow bits, some of which would have wound up in fishes' stomachs. Pieces of a smashed computer and a stereo speaker would have gone too. My partner Kate and I also picked up a trail of flavored brandy bottles, wine and beer bottles, and many cigarette butts. One cigarette was mostly unsmoked; I am guessing it was someone's unsuccessful first try. Blankets, old clothes, pens, table legs, and a kid's plastic shovel also helped filled our trash bags.

Butte Environmental Council's 30th Annual Bidwell Park and Chico Creeks Cleanup took place on Sept. 16 in conjunction with the annual Coastal Cleanup. Before today's event, volunteers had contributed over 30,000 volunteer hours at every waterway in Chico, California's city limits: Big Chico Creek, Little Chico Creek, Comanche Creek, Lindo Channel and Teichert Pond. These citizens work for three hours at each site and removed many tons of garbage, scrap metal and recyclable materials from the waterways.

Social Stewards, one of the many community groups that participated in this year's cleanup coordinated the work at Lindo Channel and its surroundings. Michael, a cleanup volunteer said, "We opened a storm drain and there was all kinds of trash there – drinking cups, beer bottles, plastic bags, fast food. We also found a shopping cart that was buried in the streambed. Only a few inches were sticking up." The team wasn't able to dig the cart up, but Michael and I did manage to drag a car's rear bumper up a hillside and away from the creek.

Aaron Logan, who represented Social Stewards said, "We found quite a variety of items in the creeks. We found some large items like household furniture and decorations, car bumper, mattress and computer speakers but, mostly litter and recyclables that lined the creeks or floated down during the wet season. We did find a few articles of clothing and a sleeping bag in good repair that were salvaged and will be cleaned by The Jesus Center (an organization that serves Chico's homeless community)."

Angel Gomez, BEC's Program Watershed Coordinator said, "I don't think people realize that trash that accumulates on the street from peoples' everyday lives end up in the creeks. There's no other place for it to go. A lot of people, especially first timers are astounded by how much trash accumulates at one location. It takes events like this to get it out of there."

Natalie Carter, BEC's Executive director said "What I really hope that folks will get out of this experience is some enhanced awareness, something that makes them pause and really think before they throw a piece of trash out of their car window, drop a cigarette butt on the ground, or walk away from a mess they made eating lunch the park."

“This year there’s been a big community involvement,” Gomez said. “We’ve seen more business partnerships than in the past. Everybody’s stepping up!”

The City’s Parks Department provided grappers for grabbing trash items and hauling them out of the waterways. This department also shared dump trucks, and people to drive the trash away. “Japanese Blossom, Orchard Supply Hardware, Chico Volkswagen-Mazda, and others provided funding. Madison Bear Restaurant provided free hamburgers to volunteers at a post cleanup celebration at Sierra Nevada Brewery, where they were also rewarded with a free beer.

Aaron Logan described Social Stewards as “a local group that has the intention to create a fun, community approach to improving ourselves and the world around us.” A wide range of other businesses, community groups, churches, and Greek organizations preregistered and pledged to send volunteers. These included Home Depot, Grace Community Church, Chico Community Watch, Chico Bag Company, Association of Geologic and Environmental Students California State University Chico, Chico Natural Foods Cooperative, Wildflower Open Classroom, Chico State Management Club, Klean Kanteen, Gamma Zeta Alpha Fraternity, Inc., and others.

Volunteers found trash everywhere, but the amount and types of trash varied from one spot to another. Scott, a volunteer who worked near Big Chico Creek in Upper Bidwell Park commented, “It was kinda sparse, but we got half of a big bag of garbage and a couple buckets of recyclables. We also found dirty toilet paper, and used diapers.”

Sandra, who also worked in Upper Park said, “I figure the people who hang out in Upper Park are closer to nature. Then you got people who hang out in one spot and leave lots of beer tabs and cans.”

Gomez described a common misconception that the waste mainly comes from Chico’s homeless population. “Lots of people assume that all the trash comes from illegal encampments but trash in creeks has been a problem a lot longer than encampments.” People who are familiar with the homeless know that many of these people work to remove trash and recyclables from their camps. BEC’s policy is to inform homeless people that there will be a cleanup in an area so people can move their belongings and not have them thrown away.

Carter agreed that trash comes from all parts of the population; she described her frustration with the waste that comes from consumer culture. “The piece of it that has been bothering me lately is the fashion industry. A materials like polyester breaks down when we wash it... It goes into the water system and gets eaten by fish, and when we eat those fish, we get them. I rotate in terms of what bothers me.”

Carter also reflected on educational opportunities the cleanup offers. “It’s also an opportunity for people to learn what happens to trash – what goes to landfills, what goes to recycling. It gives people guidance about what to do if you come across hazardous materials like several gallons of motor oil. You shouldn’t be cleaning them up –we encourage people to contact the Fire Department or the Park’s Department when they find them.”

Gomez reported, “The Cleanup had a total of 475 volunteers who helped remove 8 tons of waste! The breakdown of the waste is 6.85 tons to the landfill, .83 in recycling (that includes clothes to the Jesus Center), and .32 tons of scrap metal.”

Natalie Carter told the cheering volunteers at the barbecue, “We couldn’t have done it without you!”

“It’s about taking ownership of our creeks as a community,” Carter said later. “A lot of people, especially first timers are astounded by how much trash can be found in one location, and realize they can help. “

Many people who live in the West Lindo Channel neighborhood stopped to thank the Social Stewards group for our work. Others saw how many things we removed, and hopefully thought of responsible ways to deal with neighborhood trash. A big effort like this can also guide people to reflect on all the products they can happily live without. Community is one key to making it through these troubled times and building a healthier world!